



National Child Care Information Center

A service of the Child Care Bureau

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DEFINITIONS OF LITERACY TERMS

The following resource has definitions of key literacy terms that are used in discussing emerging and early literacy.

■ *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children* (January 1998), ed. Catherine E. Snow, M. Susan Burns, and Peg Griffin, published by the National Academy Press, reports on the work of the Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties, National Research Council, which was charged with conducting a study of the effectiveness of interventions for young children who are at risk of having problems learning to read. The following terms were defined in the book:

- **Concepts of print** are a set of understandings about the conventions of literacy, e.g., directionality, intentionality, stability, use of blank spaces and letters, and multiple genres and uses. (page 317)
- **Lexicon** or vocabulary refers to stored information about the meanings and pronunciation of words. (page 46)
- **Metacognition** refers to thoughts about thinking (cognition): for example, thinking about how to understand a passage. (page 45)
- **Metalinguistic** refers to language or thought about language: for example, noting that the word “snake” refers to a long skinny thing all in one piece but that the word itself is neither long nor skinny and has four parts when spoken and five parts when written. (page 45)
- **Morphology** is the study of the structure and form of words in language or a language, including inflection, derivation, and the formation of compounds. (page 22) **Morphology** refers to the way words are formed and are related to each other. (page 46)
- **Orthography** is a method of representing spoken language by letters and diacritics, spelling. (page 22)
- **Phonemes** are the speech phonological units that make a difference to meaning. Thus, the spoken word rope is comprised of three phonemes: /r/, /o/, and /p/. It differs by only one phoneme from each of the spoken words, soap, rode, and rip. (page 52)
- **Phonemic awareness** is the insight that every spoken word can be conceived as a sequence of phonemes. Because phonemes are the units of sound that are represented by

the letters of an alphabet, an awareness of phonemes is key to understanding the logic of the alphabetic principle and thus to the learnability of phonics and spelling. (page 52)

- **Phonics** refers to instructional practices that emphasize how spellings are related to speech sounds in systematic ways. (page 52)
- **Phonological awareness** is a more inclusive term than phonemic awareness and refers to the general ability to attend to the sounds of language as distinct from its meaning. Phonemic awareness generally develops through other, less subtle levels of phonological awareness. Noticing similarities between words in their sounds, enjoying rhymes, counting syllables, and so forth are indications of such “metaphonological” skill. (page 52)
- **Phonological** decoding or, more simply, decoding, refers to the aspect of the reading process that involves deriving a pronunciation for a printed sequence of letters based on knowledge of spelling-sound correspondences. (page 52)
- **Phonology** is the study of speech structure in language (or a particular language) that includes both the patterns of basic speech units (phonemes) and the tacit rules of pronunciation. (page 22) **Phonology** refers to the way sounds of the language operate. (page 46)
- **Pragmatics** refers to the ways the members of the speech community achieve their goals using language. (page 46)
- **Semantics** refers to the ways that language conveys meaning. (page 46)
- **Speech discrimination**, including phonemic discrimination, is distinguished from phonemic awareness because the ability to detect or discriminate even slight differences between two spoken words does not necessarily indicate an awareness of the nature of that difference. Moreover, the study of the phonetics indicates that, both within and between speakers, there are many variations in the acoustic and articulatory properties of speech, including phonemes, that are not functionally significant to meaning. (page 52)
- **Syllable** is a unit of spoken language that can be spoken. In English, a syllable can consist of a vowel sound alone or a vowel sound with one or more consonant sounds preceding and following. (page 22)
- Spoken words can be phonologically subdivided at several different levels of analysis. These include the **syllable** (in the word protect, /pro/ and /tEkt/); the **onset** and **rime** within the syllable (/pr/ and /o/, and /t/ and /Ekt/, respectively); and the individual **phonemes** themselves (/p/, /r/, /o/, /t/, /E/, /k/, and /t/). The term **phonological awareness** refers to a general appreciation of the sounds of speech as distinct from their meaning. When that insight includes an understanding that words can be divided into a sequence of phonemes, this finer-grained sensitivity is termed **phonemic awareness**. (page 51)

Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children is available on the Web at
<http://www.nap.edu/books/030906418X/html/index.html>.

The National Child Care Information Center does not endorse any organization, publication, or resource.

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